

Rationale

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in All Subjects focus on building student ability to read and understand grade-level complex text and express that understanding clearly through writing and speaking. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the role of close engagement with text in students building knowledge about the world. A coherent sequence of texts around a clear topic or line of inquiry will support students in building vocabulary and background knowledge. Text sets are one tool for educators in planning units of instruction to help students meet the demands of the Standards.

What is a text set?

A text set is a collection of related texts organized around a topic or line of inquiry. The line of inquiry of a given set is determined by an anchor text—a rich, complex grade-level text. The anchor text is the focus of a close reading with instructional supports in the classroom. The number of texts in a set can vary depending on purpose and resource availability around a given topic. What is important is that the texts in the set are connected meaningfully to each other to deepen student understanding of the anchor text. In a sense, the texts “talk to one another” so that in reading the set, students build a coherent body of knowledge around a topic.

There are many ways of organizing text sets. Often, strong sets will be organized around the topic of the anchor text, so that students have the opportunity to build additional knowledge about that topic. For example, with an anchor text like “When Mr. Jefferson Came to Philadelphia,” a piece of historical fiction for the 4-5 grade band, an accompanying set would likely include texts on the topic of the American Revolution. Building vocabulary and content knowledge about that period of history will help students make rich meaning out of the anchor text. However, the line of inquiry of a text set may also ask students to engage in a genre or author study. We encourage you to consider a range of approaches to organizing sets, constantly returning to the question: “What would this set help my students build knowledge about in the world?”

On the following page, we have generated a list of the general features of strong and weak text sets to serve as guideposts in developing your own sets.

Features of Strong Text Sets for Instructional Texts:

Strong text sets	Weak text sets
<i>Text sets include a range of print and digital texts in diverse media, formats, and lengths.</i>	<i>Text sets are exclusively print or digital and focus on one media, format, and/or length.</i>
<i>Text complexity levels support student achievement of the grade-level complexity demands of the CCSS.*</i>	<i>Text complexity levels are erratic and do not support the staircase of text complexity in the CCSS.</i>
<i>Texts are used in service to the standards.</i>	<i>Text are selected before standards are identified.</i>
<i>Texts build student knowledge about a topic, and there is meaningful connection to the anchor text.</i>	<i>Texts are not related or connected across sets, or they are only superficially connected.</i>
<i>Texts are authentic, rich, culturally responsive, and worthy of study.</i>	<i>Texts are only commissioned texts or textbook passages.</i>

*One strategy for supporting readers is to use a gradated text set, a set in which the complexity demands steadily increase to build towards instruction around a grade-level text. In this case, some texts in a set may start below the quantitative demands of the grade band in an effort to build towards the anchor text. Similarly, some texts may place above the band to provide an opportunity for advanced engagement with the content after students have built vocabulary and background knowledge through the anchor text.

Features of Strong Text Sets for Independent Texts:

Strong text sets	Weak text sets
<i>Text sets include a range of print and digital texts in diverse media, formats, and lengths.</i>	<i>Text sets are exclusively print or digital and focus on one media, format, and/or length.</i>
<i>Texts are at students' independent reading level.</i>	<i>Text complexity levels are either too low or too high, so students are not engaged with the texts.</i>
<i>Students are able to apply learning over time.</i>	<i>Texts are not related or connected across sets or they are only superficially connected.</i>
<i>Texts promote the joy of reading.</i>	<i>Texts are only commissioned texts or textbook passages.</i>
<i>High interest texts include a range of texts from which students can choose.</i>	<i>Students do not have choice or the texts focus exclusively on topics, genres, or formats that do not interest students.</i>

The following are examples of text sets, both strong and weak.

Strong Text Set	Weak Text Set
<p>Anchor Text: <i>Fahrenheit 451</i>, Ray Bradbury</p> <p>Related Instructional Texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You Have Insulted Me: A Letter,” Kurt Vonnegut (Informational) • “Burning a Book” by William Stafford (Poem) • “The Book Burnings,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Informational) • <i>The Book Thief</i>, Marcus Zusak • “Learning to Read and Write,” Frederick Douglass (Informational) • “Learning to Read,” Malcolm X (Informational) • “Unto My Books So Good to Turn,” Emily Dickinson (Poem) • “The Portable Phonograph,” Walter Van Tilburg Clark <p>Related Independent Texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>1984</i>, George Orwell • <i>Brave New World</i>, Aldous Huxley • <i>Twelve Years a Slave</i>, Solomon Northup • <i>Persepolis</i>, Marjane Satrapi • <i>Animal Farm</i>, George Orwell • <i>Ella Minnow Pea</i>, Mark Dunn • <i>The Sledding Hill</i>, Chris Crutcher • <i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i>, Harriet Beecher Stowe • <i>The Giver</i>, Lois Lowry • <i>Places I Never Meant To Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers</i>, Judy Blume • <i>Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress</i>, Dai Sijie 	<p>Anchor Text: <i>Fahrenheit 451</i>, Ray Bradbury</p> <p>Related Texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ““Chaos:’ Gunman Ambushes, Kills Two Firefighters at New York Blaze,” Catherine Shoichet and Greg Botelho (CNN) (Informational) • “Johannes Gutenberg and the Printing Press,” Mary Bellis (About.com) (Informational) • <i>Fahrenheit 451</i>, Francois Truffaut (Film) • “About Ray Bradbury: Biography” (Informational) • “The Pedestrian,” Ray Bradbury (Literary) • <i>The Children’s Story</i>, James Clavell (Literary)

While there are some merits to the weaker set, the connections between some of the texts are superficial or tangential, and it is not clear how a teacher would use these texts to support student knowledge building. The stronger set is more focused. The anchor text and related texts are connected concretely by the topic of censorship. Thematically, these texts provide a comment on the social and political effects of gaining knowledge through reading and writing. Strong sets often present opportunities for both topical connections and thematic connections that students are able to discern through rereading and deep analysis. They provide a rich context for close, analytic reading, comparison, and synthesis of texts through which students are more likely to meet the expectations of the CCSS for ELA/Literacy.

Steps to Creating a Text Set:

Selecting texts for teaching is a complex and nuanced process. There is no single process for creating a text set; educators may take a variety of different approaches given their aims and available resources. The following can be used as a basic guide to creating your own text sets:

Step One: Learn

The first step is to learn. You must know your content standards. Ask yourself, *What is it that students need to know and be able to do?* Then ask, *What texts can be used in service to the standards?* Always start with the standards, not the resources. Once you know what it is that students need to know and be able to do, you can identify an anchor text and/or formulate an overall line of inquiry for the set. This can happen in either order. An educator may first identify an anchor text, from which they formulate a line of inquiry for the set OR an educator may choose to first identify a topic for a unit of study and then seek out an anchor text around which to build the set.

In the case of *Wonders of Nature*, for example, the text set author started with the anchor text. The topic of the anchor text is animals with special abilities that affect how they live in the world. From this, the author of the set determined that the overall line of inquiry would be *animals with special abilities*. Determining the overall line of inquiry in a set with an informational anchor text is often straight-forward; you can use the topic of the anchor text as the central organizer of the set. With a literary anchor text, it may be more challenging to settle on an overarching line of inquiry prior to exploring available resources. In some cases, you may need to adapt your line of inquiry as you select the richest available resources that connect with the anchor text.

The most important part of this step is that the anchor text be a grade-level complex text that meets the complexity demands of the Common Core State Standards and is worthy of the time and attention of students. Without a rich anchor text, it is impossible to create a worthwhile text set, which is why you must also understand the components of text complexity and how to evaluate the complexity of texts.

Step Two: Inventory

The second step in the process for creating collections of texts is to do an inventory of the texts that you currently have that could potentially be part of the text set. Identify texts that can be used in service to the standards and that fit within the topic of the unit. It is important to evaluate those texts for their complexity.

Step Three: Locate Gaps

The third step is to locate gaps. Are your current texts developing your students' literacy skills? Are students able to develop a deep understanding of the content? Do your texts provide rich and varied language experiences?

Step Four: Make Strategic Selections

The final step is to make strategic selections. This is when you add texts to the texts you already have in order to create text sets that have multiple print and digital texts in diverse media, formats, and lengths and that

target specific standards. In order to make strategic selections, remember the features of developing strong texts sets:

For Instructional Texts	For Independent Texts
<i>Text sets include a range of print and digital texts in diverse media, formats, and lengths.</i>	<i>Text sets include a range of print and digital texts in diverse media, formats, and lengths.</i>
<i>Text complexity levels support student achievement of the grade-level complexity demands of the CCSS.*</i>	<i>Texts are at students' independent reading level.</i>
<i>Texts are used in service to the standards.</i>	<i>Students are able to apply learning over time.</i>
<i>Texts build student knowledge about a topic, and there is meaningful connection to the anchor text.</i>	<i>Texts promote the joy of reading.</i>
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Use databases to research texts around the topic. Sometimes you will need to adjust your search terms to find a range of texts on a topic. For example, in building the *Wonders of Nature* text set around animals with special abilities, the text set author searched *animals with special abilities, animals, animal adaptation, moles, beavers, praying mantis, chameleon, trap-door spider, spiders, archerfish*, etc. You want to protect the coherence of the set, but also be creative with search terms that might bring you a range of resources.

Several databases allow you to organize texts according to qualitative and quantitative measures. These databases are exceptionally helpful in building a text set, as otherwise you need to evaluate the text for their qualitative and quantitative measures. Here are just a few resources we'd recommend exploring:

- **BadgerLink** (<http://www.badgerlink.net/>) allows you to search for texts through multiple means such as database, text type, keyword, author, title, or subject. BadgerLink is made free by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for Wisconsin residents.
- **TeachingBooks** (<http://www.teachingbooks.net/>) allows you to search for texts by title, author and illustrator, subjects, booklists and awards, grade levels, curricular areas, genres, type of resources, and format of resources. You can also find out the text quantitative and qualitative measures. TeachingBooks is made free by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for Wisconsin residents and is also accessible through BadgerLink.
- **Children's Cooperative Book Center (CCBC)** (<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>) allows you to search for individual books as well as booklists of texts. CCBC publishes *Choices*, an annual best-of-the-year list.
- **Lexile "Find a Book"** (<http://www.lexile.com/fab/>) allows you to search for books by Lexile, grade, and topic.
- **Scholastic Book Wizard** (<http://www.scholastic.com/bookwizard/>) allows you to search for books by topic and filter by quantitative measure.
- You may also want to look at the text resources available through **Read Works** (<http://www.readworks.org/spotlight-on-science>) and **Reading A-Z** (<http://www.readinga-z.com/>).

- School librarians have a wealth of experience in using these databases to locate texts at given levels of complexity, so contact your school librarian (or a local librarian) for additional assistance.

Continue to refine your selections until you are satisfied that you have a range and balance of texts that support student engagement with the line of inquiry. Then, finalize your selections and document the text set for use in your instructional unit and to share with other educators. In documenting your set, we recommend including the title, author, qualitative measure, quantitative measure, source, text type, and brief summary/justification for including the text in the set.